

Mysterious words by the harbour hold up their audience

Nick Galvin

Covering more than 2000 square metres, Sydney's latest public artwork is certainly hard to ignore. But what exactly does it mean?

Spelled out in 14 metre-high upper-case letters on the temporary scaffolding enshrouding the front of the Museum of Contemporary Art is the tantalising phrase "IT HOLDS UP".

The words have slowly been revealed over the past month by New Zealand artist Mike Hewson, working from a cherry picker on the 25 metre facade, giving plenty of time for passers-by to speculate on their intent.

"People are absolutely fascinated and confused and impressed and all sorts of things," says Hewson, who collaborated on the project with fellow artist Agatha Gothe-Snape.



"It could mean anything": Artists Agatha Gothe-Snape and Mike Hewson with their artwork at the MCA. Photo: Marco Del Grande

"Everybody is making a guess about what it might say."

The work has been commissioned by the MCA and the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority,

owner of the building. Hewson took a photograph of the front of the building that was then printed life-size on adhesive-backed vinyl.

The letters were then cut from

the vinyl and painstakingly applied in sections to the opaque material covering the front of the temporary scaffolding. "It's as though you are cutting through the scaffolding and revealing the building behind," he says. "A lot of the stuff I like to do is just showing people what is already there but in a way that makes them look at it in another light and from another perspective."

The work can be seen from all around Circular Quay and the Opera House precinct but there is one "magic" viewing spot from which it lines up perfectly.

"It's a particular seat slightly off centre and up against the water," Hewson says. "You stand there and the kerning of the letters is perfect, as if someone has just cut it through perfectly. From every other angle it's distorted."

Over the weekend the completed

artwork will be floodlit, adding an extra dimension to it, Hewson says. And then shortly after that it will begin to disappear, as the refurbishment work on the building is completed.

"It might be up in its entirety for only a week," Hewson says. "It's almost like a really slow stop-motion animation."

So why did Hewson and Gothe-Snape choose this particular, mysterious phrase?

"It's a work on the MCA so both of us were mindful of the space and how public it is," Hewson says.

"We wanted it to be most about the place itself. Obviously, the museum is an enduring institution that continues to pioneer contemporary art. In some ways it holds contemporary art up in front of Australia. The scaffolding itself also holds up the work. It could mean anything."